

Proud to serve

The Defense Courier Service

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The early morning sky was dark outside the cockpit of the US C-141B Starlifter, but the Suez Canal, 35,000 feet below, was clearly defined by twinkling village lights on both banks. Air-traffic controllers, speaking in accents that reflected former English and French hegemony in the area, cleared the huge aircraft through one air sector to another as it sped toward Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. This mission of the Defense Courier Service (DCS), the 10th in a series nicknamed Project "Desert Sun," was about four hours from successful delivery of its sensitive cargo. It was 7 January 1990, barely 10 days before the start of the Persian Gulf War.

Significant contributions by some of the unheralded elements of the American and Allied forces which participated in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm are slowly coming to light. One such unit is the DCS, a joint-service Department of Defense (DoD) component responsible for the secure transportation and control of highly sensitive and time-critical material requiring escort by courier. Most histories of the Gulf War will pay tribute to the Pentagon and US Central Command (USCENTCOM) strategists and the tactical brilliance of various commanders of air, sea and land combat units, but the contributions and the dedication to the men and women of the DCS should not be overlooked.

A Long History

The US has enjoyed secure courier service since the first days of the republic. Shortly after General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in October 1781, Benjamin Franklin, then American Minister to France, received an official dispatch proclaiming the victory. In those days, American ship captains and other trusted American travelers, serving as "Bearers of Dispatches," assisted a small group of American foreign service officers by carrying sealed packages of mail abroad.

This method of moving classified mail overseas continued with few modifications until 1918, when the War Department established the Military Postal Express Service (MPES) with 70 Army officers and enlisted men. Although terminated for budgetary reasons in Fiscal Year 1933, President Roosevelt, who supported the MPES concept, reinstated the courier service two years later. During the early days of World War II, the Army Courier Service, operating under the Adjutant General, used officers to move Top Secret, Secret, and Confidential material between the War Department and various theaters of operation. An enlisted service was established in May 1942, probably because of manpower shortages. In addition to the Army Courier Service, the Navy operated a service known as the Officer Messenger Mail Service, and the Army Air Corps established an element called the Air Courier Service to move cryptographic materials. Frequently, couriers from all three services flew the same routes together.

Consolidation and Change

The separate military courier services were not consolidated until the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the creation of the joint-service Armed Forces Courier Service (ARFCOS) in January 1953. The ARFCOS charter was revised seven times during the next three decades. In 1985, in the aftermath of the John Walker espionage case, DoD charged the Stilwell Commission to review all security policies and practices. The commission recommended sweeping changes for ARFCOS that unified the command structure, centralized resource management, created a focal point for policy matters, and placed the new courier service within the DoD transportation community. The DCS, which replaced ARFCOS, was officially established on 30 September 1987.

Today, DCS receives policy direction from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence; executive agency support

from the Air Force; operational oversight from the US Transportation Command; and other support from the Air Mobility Command, formerly the Military Airlift Command.

How it Works

Largely unknown to the public, DCS and the Department of State's Diplomatic Courier Service are the two principal US Government agencies chartered to escort classified material. DCS serves about 7,000 customers, including DoD components; CIA and other federal agencies; NATO; US allies; and authorized government contractors. In maintaining a world-wide network of courier routes, DCS works closely with State, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe/Allied Command Europe courier service, and the British Defense Postal and Courier Service.

DCS Headquarters is at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland. The service is comprised of 438 Army, Navy and Air Force military and civilian personnel. They are located at 37 courier stations in 15 states and US territories, as well as in 15 other nations. Regional responsibility is divided into North America East, North America West, the Pacific, and the Europe/Mediterranean areas.

DCS couriers move materials authorized by the DCS charter, including cryptographic systems and materials, communications security systems and components, perishable national intelligence, and other classified material, all of which require accountability and strict control. Once entrusted to DCS, the crates, pouches and pallets of classified material are moved using military and commercial aircraft, small air-charter services, overnight express carriers, and ground vehicles. DCS even delivers to US naval vessels at sea.

Regardless of the mode of transportation, all DCS-managed material is under the continuous escort and surveillance of two couriers. The two-courier system provides additional security, and it permits the couriers to doublecheck the 10 million pounds of classified material they move annually to ensure against misdeliveries and other errors. Also, when DCS couriers are stuck on distant flightlines due to last minute flight-schedule changes, the two-courier system allows one courier to relax.

Meeting the Challenge

The Gulf War provided the DCS with its first major contingency deployment test. Eight days after Iraqi Forces moved into Kuwait, a seven-man DCS station was sent to Riyadh for deployment with USCENTCOM elements. Another DCS unit was sent to Manama, Bahrain.

Because of the close working relationship between DCS and the Department of State, which allows either agency to transport much of the other's materials depending on destination, parallel channels of movement and cooperation were extended to this critical region. When a limit was placed on the volume of diplomatic cargo permitted into the region, DCS stepped in and continued the delivery of vital diplomatic and military material which formed the basis for early political and strategic decisions.

The DCS station in Riyadh became the end unit for a system that provided essential command, control, and intelligence material to the allied forces in the Gulf area. Responsive support from DCS was made more difficult by the shroud of secrecy covering the vast Allied deployment: communications were strained, unit locations were often vague, and deployment timetables were seldom forecast. Nonetheless, the DCS unit in Riyadh acquitted itself admirably.

In December 1990, General Norman Schwartzkopf, Commander in Chief, USCENTCOM, tasked the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) to provide critical imagery of the Middle Eastern theater of operations on a daily basis. To meet this requirement, DIA collected and processed the necessary imagery, securely packaged the Top Secret product, and delivered it to the DCS Station in Baltimore, Maryland, where DCS dispatched two couriers to Riyadh via a combination of commercial and military aircraft. Desert Sun missions began three days before Christmas 1990, and they resulted in on-site delivery within 36 hours, well under the deadline.

Weeks later, after diplomatic negotiations had failed, the largest contingent of military aircraft in the history of airpower began attacks against Iraq. Programmed with target data handcarried to USCENTCOM by DCS, US and Allied aircraft hit command and

control facilities; plants producing weapons of mass destruction; key military production facilities; bridges, airfields and naval installations; telecommunications sites; and other targets of strategic value. The DCS role during the days before the ground offensive was critical to the outcome of the war.

Delivering the Goods

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Once hostilities started, however, only combat-ready couriers were allowed to enter the theater of operations. Undaunted by Scud missile attacks, other enemy

fire, and shifting frontlines, the DCS used C-141Bs, C-130s, C-2s, C-3As, C-12s and C-21s to deliver over 1 million pounds of material, including over 200,000 pounds of joint communications codes, to over 300 Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine units. With the cessation of hostilities, Project Desert Sun was terminated, but not before 86 Washington-to-Riyadh missions had been flown with the involvement of 238 military and civilian couriers.

Whatever their mission, the dedicated men and women of the DCS live up to their motto, "The nation's couriers—proud to serve."

This article is classified SECRET.

